



ADMINISTRATION FOR
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Leveraging America's Social & Economic Resilience TANF Learning Community (LASER TLC)

**Improving TANF
Programs by Focusing on
Partnerships, Family,
Staff and Community
Engagement, and
Performance Outcomes**



*Leveraging
America's Social &
Economic Resilience*

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Improving TANF Programs by Focusing on Partnerships, Family, Staff and Community Engagement, and Performance Outcomes

Introduction

TANF programs routinely respond to external directives and requirements to institute program improvements. They also use information from their own program reviews and assessments to address important aspects of program operations and improve the quality and impact of services.



This Issue Brief describes three specific program improvement strategies employed by six state, county and tribal TANF programs. The three strategies drove changes that resulted in tangible TANF program improvements across all six programs.

The programs featured in this Issue Brief were among a group of 10 TANF programs that participated in the Office of Family Assistance’s initiative “Leveraging America’s Social and Economic Resilience TANF Learning Community” (LASER TLC).

The three TANF program improvement strategies discussed are:

(1) Revisit and reimagine your working relationships with your community partners to improve collaboration and coordination.

This strategy recognizes that your partnerships with key stakeholders need strengthening through focused attention or revitalization.

(2) Actively listen to and learn from your TANF families, community members, and program staff.

This strategy reinforces the importance of listening to the needs and aspirations of TANF families, community members, and program staff. Consider their perspectives and make the changes they request.

(3) Reorient or adapt outcome structures and monitoring elements to strengthen TANF program performance-based accountability.

This strategy affirms the value of reviewing and adapting your TANF program’s performance structure and indicators. It can support an effective transition from a compliance-based system to one based on outcomes. It can also ensure outcomes are properly aligned with the needs and goals of all members of the families served.

LASER TLC Sites

The 10 TANF program sites took advantage of the Learning Community to address human service delivery challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. All 10 programs formed teams. Each received training and coaching designed to produce improved and more responsive services for TANF families.

- * Anne Arundel County Maryland
- * Larimer County, Colorado
- * Kentucky
- * North Carolina
- * North Dakota
- * Pennsylvania
- * Washington
- * Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy’s Reservation
- * Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- * Yurok Tribe

Strategy #1: Reimagining and Adapting Your Partnerships

This section of the brief describes:

- 1) The intent and purposes of the reimagined partnerships for two LASER TLC sites.
- 2) Who the TANF programs determined they needed to partner with and why.
- 3) The process for enhancing those partnerships.
- 4) The TANF program's willingness and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.
- 5) The consequences of the revitalized partnership.
- 6) Lessons learned.



Larimer County, Colorado

Two county agencies partnered to develop an enhanced, integrated internship program for TANF families.



Larimer County is in north central Colorado. It is the sixth largest county in the state by population.

The Larimer County Department of Human Services (LCDHS) Internship Program works to place TANF recipients in internship positions they are interested in and enjoy. By participating, TANF clients build valuable work experience, acquire in-demand skills, and strengthen their resumes. This leads to greater job readiness and employability, and sometimes the placement site offers a permanent position when the internship ends.

The existing internship program had moderate success. However, it was complicated, and its benefits were compromised by several factors. The county made revitalizing the program their core TANF program improvement effort. LCDHS determined that creating a new human-centered design was crucial. It would increase client participation and support post-internship employment.

LCDHS also quickly realized that improving and expanding its TANF Internship Program required a revitalized partnership with the Larimer County Economic Workforce and Development Department (LCEWD). The Larimer Team secured leadership's commitment to strengthening the partnership and took immediate actions to enhance the relationship.

They began with teambuilding sessions for staff from the two departments, facilitated by the LASER TLC Coaches. To facilitate information sharing and coordination they included representatives from both departments in their internal meetings. This meant LCDHS and LCEWD had a better understanding of their complimentary resources.

The Larimer Team instituted a Fast Track Program revamping the referral process to LCEWD internship coordinators. They fostered ongoing cross-agency collaboration and cross-team communication. They regularly shared candidate successes and updates on impacts (such as internship placements and team connections across agencies).

LCDHS and LCEWD also initiated steps to institutionalize the partnership for the long term. They established a schedule of quarterly meetings for key staff from both departments to maintain stronger collaboration and coordination over time.

The Larimer Team identified regular cross-agency team meetings as a major contributor to the success of their program improvement efforts. LCDHS also grew more consistent in referring candidates who are truly internship ready to LCEWD. They also achieved agreed-upon placement numbers (55 placements).

Anne Arundel County, Maryland

A county agency partnered with a workforce vendor to create a streamlined intake/referral experience for TANF families.



Anne Arundel County is the most centrally located county in Maryland. It is the fifth largest county in the state by population.

The Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services' (AACoDSS) TANF program improvement strategy focused on analyzing and improving their work processes and operations. Specifically, they revamped their intake/referral process to streamline it across county agencies and make it more customer friendly.

The program developed and assessed new procedures to improve TANF customer experiences. It also eased staff concerns with a cumbersome and redundant process.

Revamping the intake/referral process required revitalizing their relationship with a primary TANF vendor – JobsWork! Arundel (JWA). AACoDSS secured agency leadership support and buy-in for the renewed partnership.

AACoDSS and JWA quickly realized success required collective experiences for staff from both agencies. They held a virtual session to build cross-agency staff rapport. The session also sought agreement on a common purpose for their revitalized partnership. LASER TLC Coaches then facilitated an in-person cross-agency teambuilding session. The goal was to build a shared vision and create joint work plans for effective collaboration.



The AACoDSS Team’s assessment identified redundancies in the intake/referral process that needed to be addressed. The team also highlighted points in the process which frustrated TANF program clients and staff. The LASER TLC Coach and Anne Arundel County Team worked together on a journey mapping process to identify redundancies and eliminate paperwork that was challenging for clients and staff. They developed new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and instituted an accountability system that identified roles responsibilities and accountability measures that focused on improving the experience of the client.

AACoDSS constantly kept their TANF program clients in mind as they collaborated and coordinated with JWA. One of the more interesting aspects of their partnering process was to build an avatar named “Rita.” Rita was a fictitious TANF customer. She helped staff unpack the complicated and disheartening experiences their clients face trying to navigate the “system” and receive needed services.

Throughout this process the two organizations addressed communication issues. Members of the team believe their communication contributed to ongoing and effective buy-in for their improvement strategy. AACoDSS worked with JWA on interagency accountability to ensure the intake/referral changes were permanent by building them into the cross-agency agreement.

The Anne Arundel Team built a new process and tools to eliminate administrative duplications and responsibilities. They crafted a detailed change process and regularly collected staff and participant feedback to evaluate and adjust their efforts as needed. They also designed and executed a new data sharing process. This generated several data exchange issues which required attention and creative solutions.

The Anne Arundel Team found that their process led staff across both agencies to “own” and support the changes. Their enhanced partnership contributed to increases in productivity and staff accountability. It will also improve their responsiveness to caseloads and TANF clients’ experience.

Strategy #2: Listening To Your TANF Families, Staff and Community



This section of the brief describes:

- 1) The intent and purpose of the outreach and engagement strategies of two LASER TLC sites.
- 2) What prompted the “listening” effort.
- 3) The process used to hear what the key groups had to say.
- 4) The TANF program’s willingness and capacity to adapt and pivot as circumstances changed.
- 5) The consequences of attending to the key voices.
- 6) Lessons learned.

Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boys Reservation

A tribe intent on listening to TANF staff and family perspectives on office operations to improve client experiences.



The Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy’s reservation is a federally recognized tribe located in remote north-central Montana.

The tribe has seven thousand enrolled members, with half of the enrolled members residing on the reservation. The Tribal TANF program has three offices. A central office and one satellite office are on the reservation. The third office is in Havre, thirty miles north of the reservation. The Chippewa Cree TANF team held a shared vision of creating a safe, thriving community. They want to create an environment where people can connect with each other and their culture.

The TANF program improvement initiative focused on hearing from staff, program recipients and tribal members about their program processes and internal communications. Improving internal program operations emerged as a top priority for the Chippewa Cree Team. The LASER TLC Coaches facilitated listening and brainstorming sessions with staff to identify barriers and generate solutions.

Staff shared the stress they frequently felt balancing client appointments with the timely completion of required client administrative paperwork. The team determined changing office hours for client appointments would reduce staff stress. It would also improve client services by creating time for staff to complete necessary administrative tasks.



The Chippewa Cree Team considered a couple of options for office hours. Based on verbal feedback from clients, the team decided to close the office to client appointments twice a month. The team identified specific daily operational challenges and generated potential solutions. They informed clients and the community of their plans. They secured and analyzed feedback on their proposed solutions. Implementing the TANF program

improvement strategy required flexibility and adaptation by program staff and clients. The benefit of this change for clients was twofold: the TANF program could process payments promptly and staff could more fully engage with clients without the competing demand of paperwork.

Throughout the brainstorming and listening sessions, the team also expressed the need for better internal communications. In response, the Chippewa Cree Team created new communication standards. These included weekly team meetings, shared agendas, and group tasks.

The team also adopted a goal-tracking process that reflects their local culture and approach, which will help ensure its continued use. The TANF program implemented these new communication standards and is prepared to make additional adjustments as needed.

The Chippewa Cree Team successfully created and implemented their program improvement strategy based on forging a shared vision and an intentional process. This process required the team to establish trust and respect so that open and honest discussions could occur.

Yurok Tribe

A tribe focused on listening to its members and TANF staff to reimagine and craft an improved and more responsive program.

The Yurok Tribe is a federally recognized tribe in California, with over 5,000 enrolled members. The Tribe's ancestral lands include much of the coastline near present-day Klamath. The lands extend up to the Klamath River for over 40 miles. The Tribal TANF program serves eligible tribal residents of Humboldt and Del Norte County.



The Yurok Tribal TANF program is committed to mobilizing community resilience and breaking intergenerational cycles of trauma. Their TANF improvement strategy primarily focused on hearing from members of the tribe.

The Yurok Team developed and conducted a survey seeking tribal youth and adult input on prevailing risk factors, needs, and desired services. They also wanted to gain insights and perspectives from TANF program staff. The LASER TLC Coaches provided feedback and guidance on survey design.

Survey risk factors included: suicide, trauma, domestic violence, diabetes, depression, homelessness, and drug use. The survey offered tribal members the opportunity to weigh in on prevention options, including cultural, sports, health, and education activities:

- ✓ Yurok dance
- ✓ traditional foods
- ✓ basket making
- ✓ Yurok language
- ✓ basketball
- ✓ yoga
- ✓ leadership development
- ✓ education on historical trauma
- ✓ job search
- ✓ resume writing

The Yurok Team also considered options for data collection. Survey data were collected during community events at several different community locations within the tribe's service area. This approach had benefits and challenges. The approach was beneficial in seeking input from tribal members living in various tribal communities. However, providing the survey at events where community members were participating in other activities reduced the completion rate.

Data were entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed. The initial results informed team members about current needs and present and future TANF program services. The team plans to collect additional data and directly hear from a greater number of tribal members.

They are also considering ways to improve survey completion and employ other data collection options to capture the concerns and ideas of Yurok families and tribal community members.

In the future, the Yurok Team is considering options to incentivize survey completion, possibly through gift cards or raffle entries. Members of the team also believe some tribal members aren't comfortable filling out a survey. They are considering non-survey data collection methods such as facilitated brainstorming sessions or talking circles.

Engaging tribal members in identifying local needs and service priorities was the basis for the team's TANF program improvement. Hearing directly from tribal youth, adults, families, TANF recipients and program staff is fundamental to reimagining and improving the Yurok Tribe's TANF Program.

Strategy #3: Reorienting and Revising TANF Performance Outcomes



This section of the brief describes:

- 1) The intent and purpose of performance revision strategies.
- 2) What prompted the review and scrutiny of existing measures.
- 3) The process and procedures characterizing the outcome redesign initiative.
- 4) The TANF program's flexibility and capacity to adapt and adjust as events evolved.
- 5) The consequences of the outcome revision work.
- 6) Lessons learned.

Washington

A state committed to moving beyond the work participation rate (WPR) and shifting to outcomes that matter for the whole family.



Washington State's TANF program improvement strategy focused on developing and introducing a process to change the culture of their WorkFirst Program. This required reorienting their outcomes and producing an alternative set of performance measures.

The Washington Team's big "aha" moment was recognizing that their TANF program needed to transform its organizational culture. This meant shifting away from only being responsive and accountable for WPR purposes. The team understood their TANF program needed to concentrate on client interests and choices. This would provide more effective service engagement and help them devise "measures that matter."

Accomplishing this meant de-emphasizing program activities solely geared to meeting their WPR. They needed to establish activities more closely aligned with each individual TANF family's goals.

The Washington Team also had a particular interest in making 2-GEN approaches a centerpiece of their revised services and activities. The LASER TLC Coaches shared 2-GEN resources and facilitated team conversations with several 2-GEN subject matter experts.

The team's change process gained support among agency leadership who approved the shift in performance outcomes. TANF program staff also supported the changes. The team also received backing from their federal partners. They were motivated by similar actions considered and undertaken in TANF programs around the country.

Success required considering the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staffing levels and workloads. Success also compelled the team to advocate and pursue the outcome shift amid competing agency and state priorities.

The Washington Team formulated a revised set of process and outcome measures.

New processes developed included:

- ✓ Introducing action steps to expedite client entry into the WorkFirst program.
- ✓ Placing renewed emphasis on the initiation of employment/training services.
- ✓ Conducting more attentive and responsive case management to directly address the absence of verified hours or overdue elements for clients.

Revised process measures included:

- ✓ The quick and efficient issuance of financial housing support.
- ✓ Employing parent support referrals.

On the outcome side, new measures were introduced including:

- ✓ The successful TANF family transitions to housing stability.
- ✓ The mitigation of child maltreatment reports.

Several outcome measures were also revised. The revised outcome measures included:

- ✓ Showing steady and stable employment.
- ✓ Documenting positive program exits.
- ✓ Demonstrate families are moving towards financial stability.

The team identified several criteria for TANF program improvement success. First was a revamped TANF program, and an organizational culture more fully aligned with an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) approach.

The second was TANF clients more fully engaged in services grounded in their interests and goals. A third criteria involved improved TANF program staff skills and greater work satisfaction.

The Washington Team recognized the long-term culture change needed to secure new performance measures and outcomes. Continuous progress required producing, distributing, and promoting use of the new measures by staff and partners in distinct phases over time. Consequently, quarterly goals and expectations for the program improvement strategy were set from the fall of 2022 through the fall of 2023.

Pennsylvania

A state adopted human-centered design principles as the basis for transitioning from compliance to performance-based outcomes and monitoring.



The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP) strategy sought to adopt human-centered design principles. The program improvement strategy also intended to produce a redesign of its monitoring and evaluation framework. The redesign supported a transition from compliance-focused to outcome-focused monitoring and evaluation. The BEP LASER TLC Team saw the transition as essential to using data to inform program, service, and process improvement decisions.

The Pennsylvania Team promoted shared learning, transparency, and sustained improvement among BEP staff and contract partners throughout the transition process. They understood staff backing for the new evaluation framework and data dashboard was central to their improvement strategy.

LASER TLC Coaches offered human-centered design and data literacy training. It encouraged BEP staff to contribute to the development of the updated evaluation framework.

The Pennsylvania Team also tackled ingrained organizational behavioral patterns. These routinely surfaced in response to proposed changes. They made sure that staff feedback was incorporated into updates and changes to their program improvement processes and timelines. This fostered the right mindset and skillset for changes. It also revitalized staff commitment to helping families in response to BEP staff change fatigue.

The team also made sure to communicate and gather input from contract providers and other partners on the new framework and data dashboard.

They shared proposed changes and collected contractor reactions to the shift in monitoring visit procedures and reviews from compliance-based to outcome-based metrics. They crafted new language for contracts and statements of work. This process continues, with expected completion in spring 2023.

The Pennsylvania Team demonstrated flexibility as they pursued their process and procedural change in the face of uncertainty and necessary detours. They successfully dealt with state government administration changes. They effectively strategized how to overcome unexpected resistance and hesitation on the part of BEP staff due to change fatigue. The BEP team exercised flexibility and acknowledged the need to foster staff buy-in to the new evaluation framework and data dashboard prior to implementation.

The Pennsylvania Team found that the most significant “win” was the buy-in they generated among BEP staff at all levels to shift how they think about and use performance data. An additional positive result was staff eagerness to reframe conversations between contracted providers and BEP staff from a “program monitoring” to a “program advising”

mindset. This mindset involving leading with humility, accepting criticism and feedback, and creating a “trusting” environment where staff and contract providers could speak their true opinions without fear of repercussion was central to their progress. The Pennsylvania Team found that their strategy reinforced a shared commitment to serving families.

Catalyzing TANF Program Improvement



This Issue Brief describes three program improvement strategies and processes employed by a set of state, county and tribal TANF programs participating in the LASER TLC. One program improvement strategy emphasized becoming more productive and effective in collaborating with other governmental agencies and community partners. The second strategy promoted more understanding of and attention to the needs and requests of TANF families, program staff, and communities by actively listening to them. The third strategy focused on revamping and providing greater accountability for TANF performance outcomes.

TANF programs interested in focusing on these three strategies to spearhead their improvement efforts will find ideas and methods to consider employing.

It is also important to acknowledge the central roles LASER TLC Coaches played in facilitating the improvement efforts. The coaches helped the Site Teams maintain attention and sustain action for their change agendas. They helped provide ongoing traction and progress with the planning and implementation of the sites’ strategies. They also provided an objective perspective and on-going technical expertise.



TANF programs pursuing improvements should consider how involving an external coach can contribute to making progress and successful change.

This Issue Brief is one of two produced by LASER TLC. TANF program professionals are encouraged to review the other Issue Brief addressing the topic of TANF Modernization.

Finally, TANF programs considering use of a program improvement strategy are encouraged to take the following factors into account for change agenda planning and implementation:

- Articulate the vision and formulate the purpose for TANF improvement planning and implementation:



- Respond to federal program reviews and guidance.
- Address political and executive leadership agendas and directives.
- Conduct an internal assessment of operations and determine areas where improvement is needed.

- Examine various TANF program improvement options and develop associated action plans:



- Reach consensus on the merits and value of specific options.
- Craft program improvement strategies tied to specific options.
- Concentrate on operational efficiencies, enhanced performance effectiveness, and the tangible results you want for your TANF families, program staff, and communities.

- Build appropriate and effective outreach and engagement reinforcing TANF program improvement:



- Establish positive working relationships and alliances as the basis for partnering with priority stakeholders.
- Emphasize capturing the concerns, thoughts, and suggestions from TANF participants, program staff, and the community to effectively enact TANF program improvement strategies.

TANF program improvement is feasible and capable of producing real change. TANF program leadership and staff are encouraged to employ program improvement initiatives to advance the quality of their TANF operations, services, and performance.

